

Chapter One – A far reaching Reputation

Some heroes are forgotten, their stories floating in the realm of the unheeded, no matter how much they have contributed. Oftentimes, those are the ones without whom the world as we know it would not exist, or at least not be the same anymore. A young witch called Jana Mary Gold was such a hero; she saved the Earth from being veiled in never-ending darkness.

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Deeply nestled within the country of Vietnam in the valley of Muong Hoa, three curious children lived. Their names were Hoang, Duy, and Hanh. Those children soon had to open a new chapter of their lives, transforming slowly but surely into young teenagers. It was the rainy season, July the ninth, when the two boys Hoang and Duy, alongside the girl Hanh, decided to visit the old storyteller Lam. He was very elderly, respected, and possessed a lot of wisdom. The inhabitants of the valley were unsure about how he acquired his knowledge; maybe his source was one of those kinds that his fellow countrymen would not have believed in anyway. Perhaps he simply didn't want to share it with others.

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Hoang, Duy, and Hanh walked through the tapestry of rice fields and hills, finally reaching his hut. Hanh entered the cottage first, greeting the famous storyteller with the words "Xin Chao Lam, we hope you're doing well these days." Duy and Hoang joined in the obligatory greeting. Lam sent the three children a welcoming smile and replied, "Xin Chao, youngsters, I am doing quite well recently, thank you for your concern." The inside of Lam's hut was very old-fashioned, lacking any hint of modern life; he refused it, deciding to stay true to the old ways. Duy sat down, leaned against one of the pillars in the house and pointed out, "It is good to know that you're doing well. I guess that you've already told us every story you know about." Hoang turned his face towards Duy and nodded approvingly and confidently, but Lam only slightly chuckled. "You're so young and behave like you've already heard everything." The three kids gazed at him with expressions of utter disbelief. "Does it mean that there are still tales we don't know about yet?" The wise storyteller looked at the kids with the sly smirk of a know-it-all, about to proudly demonstrate his wisdom to the uninformed.

"Yes, there is still a tale; in fact, it is my most adventurous and exciting one. I hesitated to recount it, as it is a very elaborate story. But now it seems like you are mature enough to fully comprehend it." Hanh stood up and provided Lam with a cup and filled it with some tea, which she had brought along the way to his house. The old man gratefully accepted it, took

a gleeful mouthful and spoke. "That is a very kind thing of you to do." With a deep breath, he asked the children, "Have you ever heard the story about the witch from Eastern Germany who saved the world from being eternally shrouded in darkness? The one who saved the daylight?"

Hoang, Duy, and Hanh shook their heads synchronously. Duy uttered, "I'm hearing something like this for the first time now." The respected storyteller Lam cleared his throat with another sip of tea and started. "It's a story of unprecedented courage, resilience, and the inevitable victory of good over evil. It took place in a land far away from here, the central part of what used to be communist Eastern Germany, one year after it collapsed. Listen carefully, children; this tale is one of those that can teach you valuable lessons and sharpen your understanding of the world."

Chapter two - just another awful day

The 1990s, especially in their early stages, were a stark example of global inequality. While some parts of the world seemed like bastions of wealth and stability, others were plagued by chaos and war. Jana Mary Gold was born in 1977, within what used to be the German Democratic Republic, a democracy only in name. She had many friends in her early life, but as Jana's childhood drew to a close, her interests shifted more and more towards reading; one might say she became quite bookish.

Exactly on her twelfth birthday, the 9th of November 1989, the infamous Berlin Wall fell, setting Germany on its path to reunification. Jana, her mother Alma, and her father Karl found themselves in a state of eager anticipation during that time. The reason behind it was that the young family finally saw their dream of vacationing outside Germany becoming a reality. The iron curtain lifted, and Jana's parents managed to save up a reasonable amount of money, thanks to their frugal lifestyle. Despite losing some of their savings due to the difference in value between East German and West German currency when exchanged, the sum was still good enough for a proper holiday.

However, this plan never materialised. A few days after Jana's twelfth birthday, her mother Alma tragically died—she was struck by a car at the young age of twenty-nine. Karl and Jana were plunged into despair after this loss; Alma had been a loving mother with deep affection for Jana and her husband Karl. As if this tragedy wasn't enough, Jana's father lost his job at the local car factory, and finding new job opportunities was challenging during this period of structural changes. The loss of his love and his stability proved too much to bear, and he turned to heavy drinking. Entangled in her mother's death and her father's internal collapse, Jana found herself burdened with far more responsibilities than she should have had.

And if you thought we were finally done with Jana's troubles, you'd sadly be wrong. As a young teenager, she developed some insecurities along the way. Jana disliked her strawberry blonde hair and freckles, referring to them as "Stupid dots on my face." These traits were inherited from her great-grandmother, known to be a rather mysterious woman named Hannelore Mary, born in 1910. Pictures of her hung in the Mary Gold family's living room, not only as a reminder of the past but also a strong indicator of whom Jana resembled most among her ancestors. Each time she attempted to learn more about her great-grandmother, her family members abruptly ended the discussion and diverted from it, almost as if she had done something wrong in her past. Yet Jana would soon discover that this was not the case.

Another of Jana's concerns was her standing in the school class she attended. The girl seemed quite bookish and could be considered a nerd. She loved reading, especially historical novels and history books. Her fondness for these topics developed as Jana used such books as a means to escape her own reality. However, it also made her the target of ridicule, as she was more engrossed in her books during breaks and after school than in forging connections with other students.

Her only friend was a girl called Franziska, who spent as much time as she could with Jana. It would be incorrect to label their relationship as

one of pity. However, Franziska, who could be considered cute and attractive, often felt a strong pang of sympathy for Jana. She simply couldn't understand her insecurities and would often tell her, "You're such a beautiful and smart young woman; there will come a day when you finally emerge from your shell and realise that you have nothing to be insecure about."

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It was a sunny morning on the twenty-seventh of May nineteen ninety-one, a day on which, at its outset, Jana would have had no idea that her perception of the world would drastically change forever. Nothing would be the same afterwards. But what she quickly noticed was that the day started off very warm. This was a small source of optimism for Jana. On cold mornings, she usually had to go down into the basement and collect some coals to kick off the oven. Yes, you heard it right, in the building that housed the Mary Gold family's apartment, there was as yet no central heating system. But at least there was electricity.

During the week, Jana had to wake up around a quarter past six in the morning. It was no different on the twenty-seventh of May. As she stood up from her bed, yawned and stretched, she noticed a feeling not that common to her. Looking out of the window, she gazed at the medium-sized town she called home and noticed an unexplainable surge of bliss inside her. She ended up feeling rather confused about it, so she didn't dwell on it and went

on with her day. Jana entered the bathroom; an electronic water heating system provided her with warm water for her shower. Now cleaned and refreshed, she looked into the mirror and organised her hair into a messy bun. It just didn't look good to her, so Jana decided to wear them open as she normally did. With a palpable disdain in her eyes, she looked at her freckles; those stupid dots didn't seem to magically disappear overnight. Her friend Franziska was never fully able to comprehend this antipathy; she thought that freckles could be quite cute.

She quickly moved into the kitchen and saw an open local newspaper lying on the table, with circles drawn around certain job advertisements and some empty beer bottles next to it. This image was a stark reminder that even though her dad Karl was struggling, he didn't appear to be giving up just yet. The young teenage girl packed her schoolbag and took some food with her; a few slices of bread with butter, cheese, and herbs on it.

Jana left the apartment and closed the door behind her. With unmotivated yet determined steps, she crossed the street; the historic city centre unfolded in front of her. Jana's hometown was located in the central part of Germany, almost bordering the German territory of Hesse. It was once the western part of the communist East German state, but now, after reunification, it had become almost the centre of the country. If you found yourself in this city, you'd notice fairly quickly that it consisted of a lot of old

buildings; some were modernised and others were built in later eras, but overall, quite old-fashioned.

She was a keen walker; her school, a building constructed in the Victorian era, consisting of white brick walls grounded on a solid sandstone foundation and decorated with pretentious sandstone columns, was just around the corner. The young girl was deeply immersed in her daydreaming when two ravens landed very close to her. Those big black birds caught her attention. The coal-coloured ravens locked eyes with hers and croaked, almost as if they intended to tell her something important. Yet Jana was not fully able to understand their message.

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She continued on her way, stepped into the schoolyard, and entered the classroom. Wilhelm, not particularly popular but at least respected by his group of followers, crumpled up a piece of paper and threw it at her. He greeted Jana with the words “Good morning, loser,” while his supporters laughed and validated his actions with their words. Her classmate Tim, who was strong and confident, proved to be the ray of light in the darkness and confronted Wilhelm. Tim grabbed him by his collar and said, “You’re such a bully taking advantage of an insecure girl, you idiot.” Hearing these words made Wilhelm almost burst with anger and he lunged to strike a blow, but in that very moment Mr Stahl entered the classroom.

“If you insist on behaving like delinquents, you can feel free to do so in detention. Consider this your final warning.” Tim and Wilhelm immediately stopped their escalating conflict and returned to their seats. Mr. Stahl was a middle-aged man, very confident in appearance. His face seemed elongated, and a fortress of blonde hair nearly encircled a spreading baldness on his head. Stahl liked to dress very formally, yet never seemed overdressed for his job. In Jana’s class, he was the maths teacher, despite having a fairly limited understanding of the subject. This was a result of the abolishment of politics class, his original subject, after the reunification. He was self-righteous, despite his lack of maths skills. The school's decision to appoint him as a maths teacher was half-hearted and rushed.

The current subject was Algebra, which was very easy for Jana. She followed the necessary steps to solve the formulas effortlessly. Mr. Stahl struggled with the subject; it was evident from his palpable nervousness and confused mumbling. “Okay, now we have to add A to A , which leads to two times A .” Jana couldn’t take it anymore and commented, “You have to solve the bracket first.” A girl from the last row called Agnes shouted, “Captain know-it-all strikes again,” but Jana’s friend Franziska swiftly supported her, “Oh, Agnes, shut up already. The formula isn’t that difficult, silly.” After this class, an announcement by the principal followed. The school day had to end way ahead of schedule due to an ever-increasing

amount of complaints regarding Mr. Stahl's incompetence in maths, demanding a proper meeting of all responsible parties involved.

Every student left the yard of that old Victorian-era building, which had seen more than just one change of regime. The weather was still very sunny; Jana and Franziska walked side by side. After Franziska brushed some loose strands of blonde hair out of her face, she informed Jana about the upcoming afternoon. "Well, I know we initially wanted to hang out today just like every Friday, but my grandma invited us to her sixtieth birthday. I know you totally understand." Jana herself looked slightly disappointed and sighed. "Yes, I do, although you could have told me earlier." The friends hurried along the old cobblestone road, which had not been maintained for almost forty years. A gentle breeze rustled through the young beeches next to Franziska's apartment. It was time to say goodbye. The girls hugged each other, and Jana's friend told her endearingly, "I can sense how insecure and sad you're feeling some days and just want you to know that you're an amazing girl and very beautiful. One day you'll acknowledge that too." Jana's lips formed an honest sly smile; she answered, "Hopefully that day comes soon."

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Usually, this lack of afternoon activity would lead her to simply return homewards and immerse herself in some literature, but this day was different. Franziska's words had stirred up her emotions. She felt that it was

finally time for a change. Maybe it was the warm and blissful day of May, or perhaps the unexpected change in schedule; we may never know. However, this bookish shut-in girl had become adventurous. The now daring Jana crossed the main square, blindly following her instincts. A family known to her packed their belongings into their Wartburg estate car. With the upcoming challenge of reunification, many people decided to leave for West Germany due to the stable economy and plentiful job opportunities.

Jana's spontaneous stroll through the city led her to the local cemetery, the rather modern one. Her hometown possessed two cemeteries: a medieval one recognisable by its centuries-old graves, some of which housed famous knights and royalty, and another one that was just about a hundred years old. Jana never had any fondness towards graveyards because she was afraid of them as a young child, but the sunny weather made the one in front of her almost soothing, appropriate for resting in peace. The gate was wide open, and a cheerful and optimistic incidence of light welcomed the girl.

Jana didn't question her unexplainable internal navigation system which she had gained. Slightly to the left, stood an old bushy yew tree, and out of nowhere, a gentle breeze turned her attention to a single grave positioned almost at the graveyard's border. Something guided her towards the tombstone, an unexpected influx of familiarity. Our curious explorer

finally came close enough and she could not believe whose grave this particular one really was.

Hannelore Mary born in nineteen hundred ten, died in nineteen hundred seventy-seven. Even the blurriness of the old black and white photo couldn't cover up the similarity between her and Jana, which made her smile. She sighed and uttered, "So you are the great grandma no one dared to talk about; nice to meet you, Hannelore." As soon as this sentence was concluded, a rabbit with thick, bright red fur hopped right next to Jana. Little did she know how significant this encounter finally would be.

Chapter three - A life changing Encounter

The red rabbit looked at Jana with the gaze of a long-lost friend. She smiled back at him affectionately and spoke with a witty voice, "You're such a cute little animal, do you want to be my friend?" He sniffed with his whiskers, unimpressed, and hopped behind the gravestone. As the rabbit looked back at her, Jana felt invited and followed him slowly. This unassuming action lasted for three rounds around the tomb, counter-clockwise. She simply mirrored his movements without further contemplation, but then the unbelievable happened. The scene unfolding in

front of Jana was indeed hard to fathom for the fourteen-year-old. The rabbit transformed into a minuscule reddish tornado, which grew taller until it reached her height. After the swirling wind vanished, a young woman appeared.

The resemblance to Jana was unquestionable; she looked like an exact copy. The strawberry blonde hair, the stubby Greek nose, even each of her freckles were precisely in the same place as on Jana's face. The girl offered a friendly, unthreatening smile and said, "Hello Jana Mary Gold, I'm Hannelore Mary, not just your great-grandmother, but also a previous version of yours." Jana herself couldn't manage to close her mouth again. For her, this was a confronting experience; she had always approached the world with scientific scrutiny. "How is this possible? Aren't you dead? Why do you look exactly like me, and most importantly, how does it work for us to be in the same place as the same person?"

Hannelore just chuckled and began, "I am you from a previous life, your ancestor. Usually, us having this discussion wouldn't be possible. But you are of such importance to the world that higher powers have made an exception in their own metaphysical laws. I am standing here at the exact same age as you are currently, to prove to you the concept of me being Hannelore and not some kind of pretender." Jana's conscious mind was

quite exhausted after processing all this puzzling information; she pressed the back of her hand against her forehead and almost fainted.

Hannelore noticed Jana's inevitable collapse. "No, you need to know this; you're way too important to be left uninformed." She drew a thin yew staff hidden under her robe and looked for the nearest water source. A small fountain nearby seemed appropriate for the task. Hannelore moved the staff in a motion that formed an invisible rightwards turn one in the air and said, "Laguz!" She aimed her staff at the fountain and magically moved a good mouthful of water through the air, letting it splash right into Jana's face. Fully aware again, Jana used her sleeve to dry off. "Good grief! What was that?" Hannelore rolled her eyes in a manner that suggested such actions were completely normal to her. "It's called magic, girl. You'd better get used to it because from now on, it'll be the bread and butter of your profession."

It became quite evident that Jana was overwhelmed by this flood of new information. Hannelore noticed this and chose to show some humility. She knelt in front of Jana and explained, "I know this is all new to you, but please understand your importance. The world needs you. Look at the sunshine, at those trees and birds. Think about the people in your life. It's a hard-hitting fact, but you, the bookish, shy girl, are a powerful witch who is supposed to save the world."

Jana sighed, turned around, walked a few steps, and then returned to her great-grandmother. "Fine, understood, but I still have no idea how to perform magic or how to save the world." Hannelore placed her hand on Jana's shoulder. "Don't worry about it. You'll be a member of an international witch order, and regarding your importance, the training you'll receive will be excellent. Just follow me; I'll bring you to Vanadis, our arch witch."

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Shortly after Jana and Hannelore left the cemetery and crossed a section of the town, they came upon numerous allotment gardens. Jana's new identity as a witch, supposed to save the world from an as-yet-unknown force of evil, required her to adapt quickly, though it all still seemed rather outlandish. They passed by a cluster of cherry trees while walking along an unpaved path, further away from the city centre. Questions still troubled Jana's mind and demanded answers.

"So, this little rabbit with the bright red fur was you? How does this shapeshifting work?" Hannelore turned to her and explained, "Well, what you observed was a so-called Fylgja, an ancestral guidance spirit appearing in the form of a specific animal—in your case, a red rabbit."

"It's a comforting thought that deceased family members still care about you," Jana remarked with a hint of unexpected positivity in her voice.

“There's something even more useful about it. Once you've learned how to shapeshift, assuming its form will be possible. But bear in mind that whatever befalls you while in that form will affect you afterwards. If a witch shifts into the shape of a fox, for example, and is struck by a car, she will immediately die in her current Fylgja version.” With more determined steps, she continued. “There's a way to prevent this, a very effective one, which involves another witch casting a protection spell on you, along with taking a potion beforehand.”

Jana's great-grandmother made thoughtful sounds and frowned. “If I recall correctly, it consists of elderberry, linden blossom, and yarrow. But let's not delve too deeply into potions. You'll learn all of that after we reach the meeting point. It's such a sunny, cloud-free day; otherwise, we could have simply used a broom.”

Just as one question was answered, another formed in the young girl's curious mind. “I saw your date of death; you were only sixty-seven. Why is it that whenever I asked my family about you, they instantly deflected or became silent? There must have been something shady going on.” With a knowing grin, she revealed, “Often, people fail to keep things secret by saying nothing, which only makes others more curious, don't they?” She cleared her throat. “We have adversaries—a different order of witches, but a malicious one; they follow a giant who's been banished deep into an

underground cave and believe him to be a god. You'll soon learn the full extent of it. Anyhow, it appears they have an informant within our ranks who has gathered intelligence about the prophecy; thus, they're after our family. That's why you were born in the same year I died. The prophecy must be fulfilled."

Hannelore noticed a concerning image above their heads: two masked witches on brooms flew by in close proximity. She reacted swiftly and professionally. "Get down, take cover, and be silent." With a quick movement, she grabbed her thin yew tree staff and drew the shape of an angular 'B' into the atmosphere. "Berkana!" The two witches above slowly passed by, failing to notice Jana and her great-grandmother. "This spell allows you to remain undetected, as long as you don't move." "I suppose those were members of the dark order," Jana assumed. Hannelore nodded. "You're spot on."

Her gaze remained watchful as they moved further and further into the distance. "Those maggots—not only evil, but also completely irresponsible. We agreed not to fly in daylight. One day, people will notice and lose their minds." Jana listened carefully to her great-grandmother's outburst of anger. "Isn't there any offensive spell to shoot them down?" Hannelore chuckled. "There are plenty of such spells, but if we attack, one of them might escape and report our position. Not to mention what the

image of a dead witch, shot down from a broom, would cause in society.”

Jana stood up and offered to help her great-grandmother stand up too. “I guess the world isn’t ready for the concept of magic yet.”

“No, it isn’t,” Hannelore answered. “There was once a time when witchcraft was a regular, respected profession. Of course, there were always some people using it to harm others, but those were outliers. Around the end of the medieval era, the great persecution began, not only here but globally. There used to be one united order of witches and wizards; we kept our existence hidden and networked worldwide. Until this evil group split and grew immensely.” Jana absorbed her words. “Oh dear, what have I gotten into? We need to move carefully.” “Yes, we do. The mere existence of magic could send modern society out of control; they aren’t ready yet.”

Hannelore shifted her attention to the current position of the sun and was struck by utter shock as she saw how much time they'd already lost. Her gaze was filled with determination and responsibility for the important task at hand; the entire planet relied on Hannelore and Jana at this very moment. 'We've wasted a lot of time. At this pace, we won't make it to the meeting point,' Hannelore remarked. Jana had no idea whatsoever about the planning, and even less about the fact that there was a certain place and time involved. Her grandmother left her oblivious to many such details. Yet time was limited and quick action necessary. The seemingly endless row of

allotment gardens came to a close; an even smaller path followed. There were neither buildings nor gardens, just a path leading into a seemingly endless forest of old oak trees. The canopy of intertwined and crooked oak branches provided good cover for the usage of magic.

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Jana's great-grandmother juggled her thin yew tree staff from her right hand to the left, and she grabbed Jana's hand firmly. Competently drawing an invisible edgy 'P' was followed by yelling "Wunjoo," ensued by the warning, "Prepare yourself, we are going to run quite quickly, faster than anything you're used to." They started running at a speed which made their surroundings become blurry and unrecognisable. Jana wanted to scream, but couldn't; she was frozen in a state of shock and excitement. The only thing noticeable to her was the fact that they'd been running upwards. Oak trees were followed only by others. Some road crossings and rocks disrupted the colour scheme of brown and green.

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The hasty sprint ended at an opening, a little field without any further significance. Hannelore turned towards Jana and said, "This is the meeting point. I have to leave now, my dear. It was indeed an honour to meet you, and I have no doubt that you will indeed fulfil the prophecy and save us all." Hannelore retrieved a blanket from under her robe. This fabric was fabulously crafted, depicting a far-branched and strongly-rooted silver ash tree on a black background. Stars and a crescent just added another layer

to the aesthetic. Jana was impressed by this piece and asked, "What do we need the blanket for, Hannelore? If you're not just giving it to me for no specific reason." Hannelore smiled and explained, "I have to leave this realm by using the blanket. You'll have to assist me in pulling it completely over me. If you like it, then keep it, but my yew staff is of higher significance; it shall be yours. A tool, a weapon, and a loyal friend."

With a tender embrace, Hannelore continued, "Goodbye, Jana. Now you know who I was and why your parents avoided mentioning me." She sat down. "Please pull the magical blanket over me now." Jana's eyes brimmed suddenly with unshed tears; the urge to know more about an ancestor who mirrored her likeness so strongly was finally sated. "Goodbye, Hannelore. I won't let you down and will do the best I can, dear great-grandma." With that, she covered Hannelore with the blanket. In what seemed like mere seconds, a small tornado-like movement occurred beneath it. The fabric then lay flat, containing nothing but her staff.

Jana picked up the staff as well as the blanket, which she rolled up to store inside her schoolbag. Her gaze fixed on the staff. After an exhausted sigh, she remarked, "Well, that was an insane experience. The craziest, but not even Franziska would believe me." Jana shrugged and turned her gaze to the sunset. "I mean, what could be more mystical than that? I wonder what kind of meeting will take place here."

Moments after Jana finished her self-talk, a winged, unidentifiable creature closed in from above. She observed it, the staff in her hand and the backpack on her back. Anticipation peaked as she gained a clear image of this being.

A tall steed with a human face, wings, white fur, and a black mane intended to land next to her. Such an image would have shocked Jana to her core, but the previous encounter made her somewhat accustomed to the concept of supernatural encounters. The creature's black mane continued up to its humanoid head, its eyes glowing in a bright turquoise. Finally, the meeting took place, another crucial step toward fulfilling the prophecy.

Chapter four - further downwards

Once the winged human-horse hybrid landed right next to Jana, it started introducing itself. "You must be the insanely important witch whom I'm supposed to meet, the arch witch Vanadis. It's a pleasure meeting you; my name is Hengest, and I'm a burakir." Jana was about to offer her hand to Hengest, but realization hit her as she remembered that he had no hands to shake. "My name is Jana, Jana Mary Gold. It's also my pleasure, Hengest. I suppose you aren't the only burakir around?" He blinked twice with his human eyebrows before answering, "Indeed I'm not the only one, but there aren't plenty of us either. You can encounter us rather seldom. In fact, I only

know my brother Horsa. It's funny because even though he's my twin brother, his mane is white, while his fur is black, the opposite of my appearance. I wish there was a mare burakir for me." He sighed and shook his head.

Jana involuntarily chuckled, noticing that mystical creatures' problems could even mirror human ones. "Seems like the struggle is real then. I wish you all the best for finding the right person, I mean burakir." A few seconds of awkward silence followed; she hadn't had much training in talking to others, only to her friend Franziska, who at this moment was far away from all of this. "Well, where do you exactly bring me to, and who is this arch witch?" Hengest cleared his horse throat. "Our arch witch Vanadis is in charge of all magical districts around the globe, which don't follow the unenlightened world's borders. But you will find each ethnical group represented there, who all independently rule their district. It is the job of the arch witch to ensure unity, equality, and conformity between and within them. Another of her responsibilities is to organize a response to major threats. But I really can't give you more details here; she will tell you everything you need to know."

"I understand," Jana responded. "How does the travel now work? Do I simply have to jump onto your back?" Hengest calmly nodded. "Yes, why make it complicated if there is an easy way? Jump onto my back and hold

onto the space between my wings and shoulders.” Jana was full of anticipation; it was the first flight of her life, neither on a plane nor a helicopter, but on a supernatural creature. She climbed onto his back and told him, “I’m ready to take off, Hengest.” “All right, I’ll bring you to an entry to the inner world.” The unlikely duo took off and rode through the night sky. Jana could not stop herself from smiling; contrary to her previous assumption that the lightning-fast sprint with Hannelore could never be topped by anything that followed, the night flight on Hengest certainly did.

A time of silence and astonishment followed; Jana enjoyed the journey. It was an entirely new experience seeing her historical hometown from a bird’s-eye perspective. After about half an hour of flight, it was time to land at a place which seemed really unassuming at first glance. It was a tiny hamlet nestled in a valley. Hengest and Jana found themselves at the entry of a cave, which was not unfamiliar to her. “This is the elven cave! My class made a trip to it just a few years ago. I found it very interesting while my classmates were really unimpressed. You know I only have one real friend; her name is Franziska.” Hengest paid close attention to her words. “Well, you are a very special girl; witches tend to be different. You all have a certain kind of attitude and energy. But I think you will soon make a lot of friends.” He stepped confidently into the cave and said, “Let’s enter the inner world.”

The cave was dark; visibility made their way difficult. "Well, Jana, this might be the right time to cast your first spell. Use your staff and draw an invisible rightwards turned M into the air and say 'Sowulu.'" Jana took a deep breath. Would she be able to cast this simple spell, or would she prove to be without talent? She made the movement described by Hengest and uttered, "Sowulu." Her great-grandmother's staff provided a bright beam of light, not unlike one a flashlight would do. "I did it, I really did it, I can cast spells!" Her supernatural companion giggled. "Of course you can, witch!"

Step after step, the unlikely duo strode through the naturally created corridors filled with stalagmites and stalactites. This part of the cave was still familiar to Jana, which filled her more and more with doubts about a magical realm supposed to be looming down there in the dark.

"I have to say, this supernatural world is not what I imagined it to be. It's just a cave. Yes, it's not repetitive in any way, but not quite the exciting place my mind assumed," Jana remarked.

Hengest burst out in hearty laughter. "Well, if that's the case, then the entry is indeed very well hidden. Move your beam of light towards the left to the small sea; there it is." Jana pointed her wand to the left where pencil-thin stalactites hung like curtains above an immense rock, nothing extraordinary to her so far, until another little hallway caught her gaze. It seemed a tad too unassuming; if there was one hidden portal nearby, then it had to be this one. The inner world felt more tangible than ever before.

With a minuscule hint of insecurity in her voice, she said, "That's the entry, isn't it? It's so tucked away from everything, almost unable to be recognized next to that gigantic rock." Hengest nodded vigorously, like an excited horse. "You nailed it; sometimes paths of major significance are hidden by their plain appearance." Yet between them and the supposed portal still loomed the lake, neither to the left nor to the right any sort of path to reach the other side "Now, Miss Mary Gold, it's time for some magic again. Just draw an invisible straight line upwards and say the word Isas." Jana quickly became nervous; her proximity to the entrance now hinged on her talent in spellcasting. Gathering all her available focus, she grasped her recently inherited thin yew tree staff, which felt too large and almost clunky in her inexperienced hands. She drew the invisible line and casted "Isas." Hengest observed her movements cautiously, realizing soon that either Jana's powers exceeded his expectations or that she was focusing a tad too firmly on the task. Instead of creating an appropriate bridge of ice, she froze the entire cave lake. "That's outstanding for a fresh beginner; your energy seems to be insanely mighty," he remarked.

Together, Jana and Hengest crossed the frozen mass of water, which had hardened to the point that the ice didn't even crack slightly when they stepped on it; it was as stable as concrete. After crossing, they stood in front of a natural wall, a mere dead end to the unknown. "Now, for the

actual portal to become visible, we have to commence some visualization. As two individuals intending to use it, we both need to do it simultaneously. Now, strongly imagine some kind of gate,” instructed Hengest. Jana understood his instructions clearly. “Okay, got it. Once I give the signal, let’s both start visualizing.” Hengest confirmed her suggestion with an “affirmative.” She initiated the venture into the unknown with the command, “Okay, three, two, one, go!”

The visualization was lively and determined. Jana simply thought about her school’s main entrance; this was a simple task for her. Five seconds later, the supposed dead end transformed into a tunnel consisting of a bright white light. It lightly flickered and presented itself as a vivid form of energy rather than a sturdy construction. Hengest confidently entered the supernatural portal with a piece of advice of utmost importance. “Follow me and don’t look back; otherwise, the entry won’t work. I’ve heard of other people being stuck in between, as rescue hasn’t always been possible.” Hearing this cryptic warning made Jana nervous and tense; the constant danger of accidentally looking back hung in the air like a big spider in her net. She may have been unaware of all the details, but she knew that the task at hand didn’t allow any hesitation. Her heart drummed vividly until the last step finally led her and Hengest into the inner world. She stood there in awe; the first glance of this magical world of unknown and unexplainable things was understandable.

#

Jana found herself in an entirely new setting, a vibrant coastal city filled with seemingly endless rows of brick houses and buildings. Any indication of modern structures was absent, almost as if this inner world had been stuck in between the industrial and late Victorian era. This unfamiliar yet unexpectedly comforting location was neither a tranquil hamlet nor a bustling metropolis; it was somewhere in between. Hengest, amused and delighted by the young woman's astonishment, told her, "Welcome to Galdershaven, one of the most important hubs in the Spirit world." The young witch repeated, "Galdershaven, Spiritworld... Didn't we just recently call it the inner world?" Hengest nodded. "I used the term inner world for the section between the earth's surface and the portal. Everything beyond it is correctly called the Spiritworld."

This answer fed Jana's demand for understanding her new surroundings only sparsely, thus she had more questions in store. "I still don't really get it. Is this Spiritworld the hidden inside of our planet or a parallel universe? I mean, there is obviously an ocean looming in front of us, not even to mention the sun and the sky." "It's a bit confusing, isn't it?" Her winged horse-like companion started to explain. "Let's, for simplicity reasons, assume there is a copy of the earth, simultaneously created. All around the globe, there are certain entrances with portals allowing access to the Spiritworld. You'll quickly find a lot familiar to you like landscapes,

houses, and constructions, but also mystical creatures and unexplainable phenomena. Just take me as an example; I wouldn't make much sense elsewhere." Hengest explained with a hint of humble self-irony. Jana had no other choice but to giggle as she listened to him using his own character as the simplest of examples. "Okay, now I understand it better, thanks to your elaboration." The young woman felt a pressing thirst; she hadn't been hydrating herself since the journey started, but there was another obstacle. "I wish I had any money here to buy a drink. How can I earn money here, or at least borrow some?"

Her travel companion met this problem with his usual nonchalance and described another part of this universe. "Our currency system here hasn't significantly changed since the medieval era. We have the Aureus, which is a gold coin worth 25 denarii, a silver coin. Previously, we've also had Sesterces and Dupondians, which held less value than one denarius, but those were abandoned because economic developments and inflation rendered them insignificant. These are still physical coins today, and nobody wanted to walk around with tons of metal in their pocket, so the individual districts abandoned them one after another. You'll be employed and paid according to your position, or you could conduct business on your own. For money lending and investing, there are plenty of privately owned banks."

Jana listened carefully to his explanation, but words couldn't quench her thirst. "Yes, I remember the names of these old currencies, and it's great that you've managed to preserve and develop them further, but I really need something to drink now." Hengest seemed slightly ashamed after he realized that all his clarifications, educational as they were, still drifted off from the main problem. His words evidently apologetic, he continued. "Just a couple of yards further downwards, there is a huge pub called the Old Dock Inn, where docents of wizards and witches, soon-to-be recruits of the SCF, the Seithrist Combined Force, gather before further transfer. The Districts Administration pays the owners a certain subsidy; thereby newcomers can enjoy some free drinks." Jana's relief was palpable as she heard those words being uttered. "Alright, I'll get some refreshment and be back soon."

#

The young witch walked down the road, bustling with life; Galdershaven appeared to be a melting pot of the Spiritworld. An Asian potions business was followed by an Italian staff manufacturer advertising with the slogan "Finely crafted with more than twenty optional headpieces!" This shop was followed by another one selling central African voodoo masks for the "Customer of fine sense." Yet the majority of this picturesque coastal town seemed to be of German origin, hence Jana could understand their mundane discussions easily.

As something slightly less ordinary revealed itself, a gigantic poster attracted new recruits to the Seithrist Combined Force. It depicted a giant with malicious eyes forced to the ground by multiple witches and wizards wearing headbands. The text stated, "Fight today, since your children and grandchildren deserve the same freedom you have!" Another poster depicted a far-branched and strongly-rooted silver ash tree on a black background with a crescent and stars. The message on this one stated, "SCF for all that is good and truthful, ELA for disguised tyranny and doom. Make your choice!" Galdershaven wasn't solely a place of combat and rivalry; the same applied to the Spiritworld as a whole. A bunch of middle-aged old ladies idled in front of a clothing store, wearing typical pointy witch hats and robes in colourful attire. A young birch, vibrantly tinted in black and white, its leaves attached to their youthful branches, danced to the breeze blown by the nearby ocean. Slightly to the left, the Old Docks Inn, its first appearance was that of a typical old sailor's pub.

Chapter five - New Acquaintances

Filled with anticipation, Jana entered the inn. Its old, dark oak doors were heavy and tinged by time. The overall atmosphere seemed, despite the loud blend of noisy discussion in multiple languages, cosy and inviting. Another aspect that caught her attention was the absence of customers beyond the age of twenty, alongside the lack of casually dressed people

aside from the staff. Distinguished colours and clothing patterns revealed that the new recruits could somewhat be grouped into bands. Amidst the chaos, there was some sort of organization; the more she observed, the more it became evident. To her right, a French-speaking contingent dressed in long blouse shirts in dark grey, following a blue, white, and red colour pattern on their epaulettes. A little bit further away, a Japanese group wearing characteristic hachimaki bearing a rising sun. Their clothing was black and slightly tighter than the French ones.

#

Jana's thirst was yet to be sated, leading her to the bar. A vast variety of drinks and foods were depicted and described on the menu. Yet, it seemed like there was no real option for the fourteen-year-old witch, as there were only adult drinks. But she had to at least drink something to keep going, so she simply asked the bartender, "Hello, Sir, is there something non-alcoholic?" The man behind the bar counter threw a welcoming smile at Jana. "Well, adult beverages work differently in the spirit world. They don't cause physical consequences and won't make you really drunk; they don't contain alcohol. You're new here, aren't you?" Jana nodded and inquired, "So, what kinds of effects do those have then?" The barkeeper answered, "They'll make you slightly euphoric and lessen tensions. Some special ones can stir up romantic feelings, and some just keep you awake. Try it yourself; I'll give you a big glass of woodruff and lemon juice brew." Vividly and skilfully, he mixed Jana's drink and served it

in a colourful pyramid-shaped glass. She took a mouthful and found herself surprised by the taste and instantaneous result. "It's really delicious, and I feel the sudden urge to socialize with some other people." The barkeeper slightly chuckled. "Well, that's this beverage's known impact. You should go over to this table in the middle; there are a bunch of German newcomers, and you'll certainly be grouped with those lads anyway, so why not introduce yourself?"

#

Jana took this well-meant advice to heart and approached the table where the German group was seated. Their attire quickly caught her attention. Their uniform was composed of a dark green overall, covering them down to the sleeves, with silver-coloured epaulettes. Their headgear consisted of a brimless black field cap bearing a silver emblem depicting a downwards turned hammer; attached to their hats was each one falcon feather. One girl who seemed to be of Turkish origin told the other members, "I've learned a good amount of spells on the way already. Not expecting it to be a walk in the park, but it will definitely help." Encouraged by her previous drink, Jana took a seat on an unoccupied chair, almost as if it had been reserved for her. "Hey, my name is Jana, and you are certainly new recruits for the CSF, aren't you?" A blonde girl, in her British accent, replied "Well, originally I would have been part of another contingent as the German one, but I bloody confused the date and missed the transport

yesterday." Jana was not fully able to understand her words, given that she learned Russian in her East German school and not English.

The Turkish girl noticed Jana's confused reaction. "Moruk, you haven't been drinking the babel communications potion yet, have you?" She shook her head before raising her eyebrows. "Let me guess, it's a drink which enables you to understand all languages, at least inside the Spirit world's borders?" The Turkish girl smirked; she held a fondness for people with a swift understanding. "You're a smart cookie. I can give you a second bottle, quite handy that I accidentally received two potions instead of one. My name is Julide, Julide Alemdar." She swiped some loose black hair out of her face and offered her hand to Jana, who accepted it with an honest smile. "Jana Mary Gold, from Thuringia, East Germany." Julide seemed excited to meet her; was this the beginning of a new friendship? "Oh, you're from the recently reunified territories. I'm from the Rhineland. My family sustained themselves effortlessly with the money my dad earned in a steel-producing factory. But the Rhineland began to struggle, and he lost his occupation. We were always aware of a Spirit world, since my family follows a mystical secret order for generations. The entire Alemdar family basically moved to Galdershaven."

Jana paid close attention to her story and interjected, "That's an intriguing backstory, Julide. My mother died, and my father lost his jobs due

to bad economic circumstances as well. Let's say what led me here was a couple of signs and supernatural incidents, starting with the mundane school day ending up earlier than it was supposed to." After finishing her statement, she drank the babel potion in one go. "It tastes really unique, what does it consist of?" Astonished by her eager consumption of the drink, her newly found friend answered, "Well, Ayahuasca, blue opium poppy, and a Mandrake, probably mixed under the influence of some drum beats." From the table's corner, a girl with a typical British accent asked, "Can she understand me now?" To which the newfound linguistic expert confidently replied, "Loud and clear!" Julide tapped Jana on her shoulder and introduced the other band members to her. "She's called Emma Westerfield, originally meant to join an English contingent, but confused her transfer date and is now a part of us. She's basically a walking map; she carries one of the Spirit world with her and even got some spare ones in store, just in case."

Emma rolled her eyes, evidently annoyed. "Don't take her words too seriously, Jana. I have more to my character than just being a map." Her demeanour returned to a friendly and welcoming one as she concluded her sentence with a polite "Nice to meet you." Jana seemed amused, but the introductions were far from over. Julide pointed slightly to the right and continued. "This is Dennis Stamm from southwest Germany. You'll quickly notice that he's playing the part of our motivational coach. No matter how

dark the day is, Dennis stays persistent in his optimism.” The young man with his dark blonde hair and mildly hook-shaped nose countered, “Although the Spiritworld faces some problems currently, I’m still sure that good will prevail over evil and once this is done, it will definitely be a great place again.”

Another young lad sitting next to Dennis turned his head towards him. Nervously, he tapped his staff in an almost rhythmic melody. “That’s not certain yet. What if we lose? What if they sneak up on us in an ambush and cast an Ihwaz spell?” Julide directly confronted him with her unhinged yet proper attire. “Oğlum, you could also fall from your chair and break your neck. What if you slip and fall into the sea and a serpent swallows you?” Jana asked the worrisome character, “What’s your name?” His unimpressed voice answered her, “Marvin Keilmann. As you might have noticed, I’m the voice of reasoning and realism within this group.” “You misspelled the word ‘pessimism’, Marvin,” Emma eagerly hinted.

#

The French contingent, consisting of eleven members, left the Old Docks Inn as the departure of their ship was announced. Julide tapped Jana's shoulder to regain her attention from the colourful French recruits. "Next to Marvin, we have Leopoldina Müller, true Bavarian mountain lass." Jana's eyelids opened widely, as she often wondered about this well-known, classy population. Leopoldina's words were laced with a thick accent as she

reached out her hand to Jana and began introducing herself. "Griaß di Jana, I'm sure we'll get along quite well." At the sight of the last member, she not only opened her eyes wide but also her mouth. "How could that be, what a coincidence?" were probably her thoughts at that moment, though she didn't vocalise them. Just as Julide was about to catch her breath for the last introduction, Jana stopped her.

"That's my best friend, Franziska Maienbaum! I had no idea about the witchy side of you." With her long brunette hair contrasting against Leopoldina's blonde and curly locks, Franziska stood up from her seat and embraced Jana. "I'm surprised as well. If I knew you were into magic, we could have practised together all these years!" Jana found herself overwhelmed by the situation, which caused her to laugh euphorically. "Well, I was never aware that I'm a witch. In fact, today has been the first day of my life in which I realised that. I mean, who really expects to inherit such powers?" Franziska felt a stark surprise running through her body. "Wait, my freckled girl inherited that? I, as well as most others, had to learn it? Magical powers passing on uninitiated through a lineage are usually a sign of very powerful wizards or witches. Your family probably consisted mostly of magical folk."

Jana's vocal chords emitted a thoughtful sound, mirrored by her facial expression. "Does that mean that in theory everybody could become a

wizard or witch, and if so, how?" Dennis decided to educate her. "Well, if not inherited, one can receive the gift of magic through a certain ritual. You have to sit outside on a New Year's Eve and meditate intensely. You'll instantaneously feel that something has changed; it's palpable. It might not work on the first or second try; you have to be persistent. It took me three years to actually get there. I felt an unexplainable energy running through my veins, and two ravens landed right next to me." Jana faced all the other members once again. "Is that the case for all of you?" Emma shook her head and reported, "Not quite, I've also received it through my lineage." The British lass tapped her cheeks, which appeared not unlike Jana's upon closer inspection. "Oftentimes, freckles are a sign of it." A pang of confidence ran through Jana. This facial feature, which she despised throughout the years, was after all a sign of supernatural power. Julide grinned brightly at the sight of new forming friendships and proclaimed, "We'll have to drink to that, lads." She turned towards the bar counter and yelled, "We need some elderberry beer for the entire table!"

The barkeeper filled seven big glasses with elderberry beer, then thoughtfully gazed at them. "Mmm, how do I get them over there? Hah, eureka, I know." His left hand opened a squeaking door, from which he pulled out an old, robust walnut tree staff. A movement, mirroring something like a scripted N, was followed by the spell "Uruz". The seven big glasses of elderberry beer levitated onto Jana's group's table. Each of them

grabbed one of the glasses, and Marvin decided to propose a toast. "Let's raise our glasses to good times in the Spiritworld, peace, victory, and camaraderie." The other members approved his toast with a loud "Cheers!" and clinked their glasses. Leopoldina vividly hummed a song, which she often sang at gatherings in her hometown. After a few seconds, it developed into a song. "Fill up the panel folks, it's time to celebrate." The Japanese band overheard her humming and confused it with one of their magical district's uplifting hymns, which caused them to start singing as well.

"May thousands of enemies be forcing us to fight. Nonchalant, our rising sun flutters in its might. Brave shall the witch, the wizard stand, throughout day and night. If we won't defend diligently, no one else will do. Don't waver; magic folk, the dark side has to go." One of the Japanese students imitated a trumpet, while the rest clattered with their glasses. "Long ago we lost our fear, thus there's just victory. Prophesized and widely known, we will all be free. Therefore take your staff, be brave, and face the fight. Darkness never may prevail over light. They shall flee in panic, once our flag is raised."

The entire Old Docks Inn applauded this unexpected performance. But Jana wasn't able to enjoy the sociable comfort for much longer, as she realized that Hengest was still waiting for her. "Bloody axe! I've told a friend that I'm only getting a quick drink and be right back. I have to hurry

up.” Julide intervened, “Never break a promise, Jana. Credibility counts a lot in the Spiritworld.” She threw a sly smile at her; it was soothing to hear that in this universe, honesty and friendship were held in such high regard. “You’re such a cool bunch of people. Where can I get a hold on you? I guess you’re already organized in some sort of formation.” Emma stood up and saluted in the SCF’s unique custom. This was done by firstly standing up straight, secondly placing the inner side of the left elbow in front of the stomach upwards facing, and closing it with the right elbow's inner side downwards facing. “We are not certain in which kind of kindred we will be structured, but you’ll still find all of us in the ninth squadron, seventh horde of the northern-central district.” Dennis threw in, “Only ask for the German contingent, and we’ll be there somewhere around.” Jana repeated, “Ninth squadron, German contingent, got it. I hope to see you again.” Those were her last words before she stormed out of the pub.

Jana ran up the street as fast as she could and saw Hengest discussing something with his brother Horsa, whose fur colour pattern was indeed the opposite of Hengest, consisting of a black main colour with a white mane. “I’m so sorry that it took so long. The Old Docks Inn is a very sociable place; I didn’t expect that.” Horsa chuckled alongside Hengest. “It doesn’t surprise me, Jana; it has always been a melting pot, but now we really have to go.”

The End